

GROWING Together

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HAVING DOMINION

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Genesis 1:28

Can we be Christians and environmentalists at the same time? It would be easier if we could explain away this troublesome verse telling us to subdue the Earth and have dominion over it. Can't we soften the language somehow?

Unfortunately, no. The word translated as “subdue” is *kabash*, which means to tread underfoot. It is most often used to describe military victory, as when Joshua “subdued” the promised land (Joshua 18:1). Later, when the people cry out, “Some of our daughters have been ravished” (Nehemiah 5:5), the verb used is *kabash*. This is very far from the “care for” many of us might prefer to see. Indeed, we might say that *kabash*, in Hebrew, means pretty much what it sounds like in English – ka-bash.

Similarly, “dominion” translates the Hebrew word *radah*, which can also mean tread down but is more often translated as rule over. Of course, this comes from a time when, for the people involved, “rule over” and “tread down” were not much different.

Unlike 21st-Century Canada, where wilderness is a national treasure that most of us want to protect, the ancient world had no such romantic notion. Nature was “red in tooth and claw,” to use Tennyson’s phrase, a scary and dangerous reality. As a gardener cannot enjoy the bounty of God’s abundance without first subduing some weeds, the shepherds and farmers of the Bible had to subdue the predators around them. For them, nature was an opponent to overcome.

Even so, the Bible’s creation story tells us there were limits to human domination. Food was plentiful in the garden of Eden, but for both animals and humans, it was a vegetarian buffet. According to Genesis, it wasn’t until

after the flood that Noah’s family and their descendants were allowed to eat meat. (Compare Genesis 1:29-30 to Genesis 9:3.) And in Leviticus 25:4, agricultural land was to be given a Sabbath rest every seven years.

Currently, the population of humans approaches 7 billion. Natural resources are being used up or polluted at a rate exceeded only by that of the extinction of species. It may be time to re-examine our list of instructions. Be fruitful and multiply? Check. Subdue the Earth? Check. Have dominion over other creatures? Check. Perhaps we should see if there isn’t another Biblical model of behaviour toward creation that is more suited to our present circumstance.

Two come to mind: the shepherd and the steward. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter,” declares God in Jeremiah 23:1. Jesus says, “The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). The shepherd represents a model of restraint, sacrifice and care to which any environmentalist could aspire.

In the parables of Jesus, the steward is portrayed as a kind of middle manager who was held accountable by the property owner for the efficient running of a household. Here surely is a way of living in the 21st Century that is both biblically and environmentally sound – dominion achieved, but lived out in a sustainable, responsible way that balances a profitable use of the owner’s property (God’s creation) with a concern for its welfare, all in the context of ultimate accountability to our Creator.

Can we be both Christians and environmentalists? Yes. Indeed, we must be.



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